

Housing and School Choice

When young families begin to look for a home to buy or rent, there is often a recognition that there may be some trade-off between housing that is affordable and high quality public schools. The quality of the schools is part of the "bundle" of factors that affect the desirability of a neighborhood, and thus the price of its homes.³

The conventional wisdom is that the best schools are where the housing is most expensive, and that where housing is affordable, the schools are less likely to provide a consistently good education. There is some basis for this perception, but there are notable exceptions to it as well.

Low income neighborhoods may have a higher than usual percent of students who require extra educational resources: immigrant children who are not native English speakers, students with low parental involvement and low motivation, students who are hungry or unhealthy. These special needs can drain resources from a school district and time and energy from a classroom teacher. In addition, fewer of a child's peers may be oriented to educational success, or to continuing on to college.

This poses a dilemma for a young family that is looking for affordable housing, but also wants good schools for their children. Sometimes in highly-stressed school districts, a very good education can be achieved, especially if parents are involved and proactive in their children's schools. But for struggling families, often with both parents working full-time, or with only one head of household, the time to be highly involved in their children's education is particularly hard to find.

What about that conventional wisdom? A quick survey of two measures of a school district's success in readying students for higher education (12th grade graduation rate, and the percent going to a four-year

college)⁴ in relationship to average home prices in the district, does not yield a simple answer. It indicates that *at either end of the spectrum, the conventional wisdom may hold true*: where the average sale price of a home is very expensive, in districts such as Mercer Island, Bellevue, Lake Washington (Kirkland, Redmond), Issaquah and Vashon, a considerably higher percent of the graduating seniors go on to four-year colleges (about 50 – 80%), while in the districts with the lowest average home price, such as Tukwila, Auburn, and Federal Way, just 17 – 27% go on to four-year colleges.

But in the districts with mid-range average home prices (\$200,000 - \$310,000 in 2001), there are a number of school districts that do very well in graduating most of their senior class, and in sending a healthy proportion of that class off to a four-year college.

A strong high school graduation and a high percentage of college-bound peers don't always go together. For instance, Kent boasts a 12th grade graduation rate of 95% from its high schools, nearly as high as Mercer Island's 97% graduation rate. Kent, however, sends just 32% of its graduates on to four-year colleges, while Mercer Island sends 80%. Auburn, likewise, has a fairly good graduation rate at 89%, but only 24% of its students go on to a four-year institution

Home Prices and College Readiness Measures in 2001

District	Avg Home Price in District	Pct. Of 12th Graders Who Graduated	Pct. Going to Four-Yr College	Pct of Students in Private H.S. in District
Mercer Island	\$ 751,130	97%	80%	9%
Bellevue	\$ 390,788	76%	61%	24%
Issaquah	\$ 356,336	91%	49%	
Seattle	\$ 323,647	68%	37%	37%
Lake Washington	\$ 321,762	83%	55%	5%
Vashon Island*	\$ 320,104	85%	55%	
Snoqualmie Valley	\$ 309,815	73%	30%	
Northshore	\$ 307,610	84%	47%	8%
Riverview	\$ 305,209	91%	25%	
Shoreline	\$ 272,151	75%	49%	21%
Tahoma	\$ 256,615	76%	24%	
Enumclaw	\$ 209,188	91%	25%	0%
Kent	\$ 204,409	95%	32%	
Renton	\$ 204,103	107%	41%	
Highline	\$ 196,087	74%	35%	22%
Federal Way	\$ 193,904	77%	27%	2%
Auburn	\$ 183,676	89%	24%	11%
Tukwila	\$ 147,605	82%	17%	
County Totals	\$ 295,200	81%		7%

³ Data for this article was provided by the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, and by the School Profiles published by The Seattle Times. Lou Pampas, Vice President for Secondary Schools in the Renton School District helped interpret Renton's graduation statistics.

⁴ These two measures were chosen rather than test scores because the only test scores which are readily available are the WASL scores, on a school by school basis. The validity of those scores as a measure of school quality is still somewhat in question.

Renton's graduation rate during the last several years has been over 100% due to alternative programs which graduate young people who previously dropped out of traditional high school programs. It sends 41% of its students to four-year colleges. At the opposite pole is a school district like Shoreline, which sends a healthy 49% of its students on to a four-year college. But Shoreline's 12th grade graduation rate is relatively low at 75%.

Of the school districts which are mid-range in terms of affordability, the ones that do reasonably well when the measures are looked at together include Northshore, Renton, Shoreline, and Kent. Depending on a family's goals, looking for inexpensive housing in a slightly more costly district may be worth the search, and merit the trade-off of "less house" for "more school".

The Seattle school district illustrates a complicating factor in these calculations. Seattle is the fourth highest in terms of home prices among the 18 school districts reviewed.⁵ But it also has an ample supply of rental housing, some of it affordable to low-income households. Like many larger cities, it is characterized by higher socio-economic diversity than some of the suburban school districts, with the consequent demands on the school system.

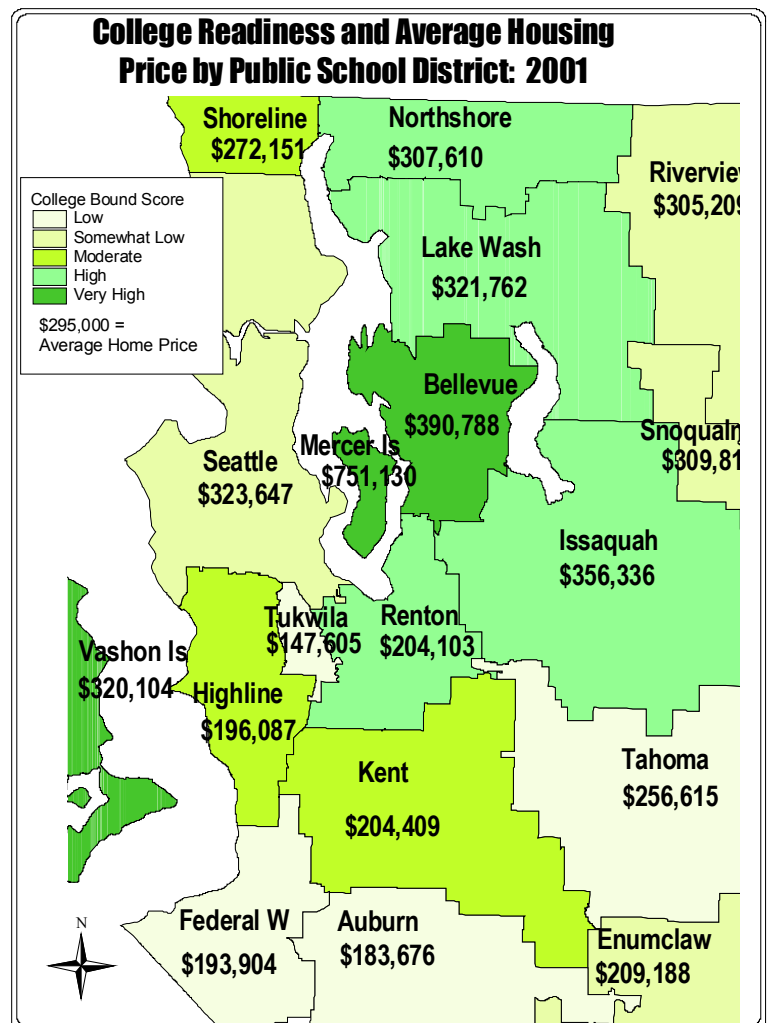
Seattle's graduation rate is the lowest in the County at 68%. However, it also has exceptionally good programs for honors students, and it sends about 37% of its public school graduates to four-year colleges. Further complicating the picture is the fact that 37% of *all* high school students enrolled in the Seattle area go to private high schools. Some of those students commute to these schools from the suburbs, but many are Seattle residents. Bellevue, Shoreline, and Highline also have a relatively high proportion of students in private high schools (21 – 24%). Since all four of these districts have lower than average public school graduation rates, it is likely that when a high percent of students attend private schools, the pool of motivated and well-supported students in the public schools decreases, and

both graduation rates and the percent going to four-year colleges are affected.

Equity is the Issue

It is clear that not all school districts are equal, whether in housing affordability, in the populations they serve, or in educational success. Striving to retain students and to prepare all of them well for the future are the challenges for every school district, no matter how stressed they may be.

But the challenge for the housing community, *and for the County as a whole*, is to create affordable housing choices in areas where they do not currently exist. When a mix of housing types and housing costs is distributed more evenly throughout the County than is currently the case, there will also be less of a burden on a few school districts to provide for the most challenging school populations. This can provide a better chance for educational equity.



⁵ Skykomish was not included in this survey, since its sample size is so small.